10. My Stay In Calcutta In 1889

Before I went to Calcutta in October, 1889, I had seen only three places-namely Arrah, Patna and Allahabad. Arrah, my birth-place was a neat little town with a population, at that time, of not more that forty thousand. But apart from the monument connected with the Indian mutiny, which I have mentioned in the first chapter of this book, there is nothing there in the way of attractive scenes and sights. Patna was then perhaps the most unattractive place, one could think of. It was one mass of fifth, dating from the times of the great Mauryan Emperors-Chandragupta and Asoka. The new civil station built since 1912, as the result of the city having been raised to the status of the capital of the province of Bihar in that year, is well-planned and finely laid out. But the old city remains still very much in the same condition in which I found it when I first came from Arrah in 1887, and it is likely to so remain unless a merciful Providence ordains that it be burnt down to the ground. Allahabad, which I visited to December 1888, on the occasion of the fourth sitting of the Indian National Congress, had impressed me most favourably, as its splendid civil station - laid out under orders of Lord Canning, the first Viceroy of India, and rightly bearing his name-is unique in the country. On the transfer, in 1858, of the capital of the North Western Provinces from Agra to Allahabad, the new civil station of Canning Town (or as now known in common parlance as Cannington) was well laid out on American plan, the roads from north to south, and from east to west running across at right angles. Amongst the many who had been favourable impressed with the civil station of Allahabad was the famous American humorist, novelist, and traveller, Samuel Clemens better known as "Mark Twain". He visited Allahabad in the course of his round the world tour, in the nineties of the last century, and wrote, in his interesting book called "More Tramps Abroad" about that famous city as follows; "The English part of the city is a town of side avenues and noble distance, and is comely and alluring, and full of suggestions of comfort and leisure, and of the serenity which a good conscience buttressed by a sufficient bank account gives. The bunglows (dwellings) stand well back in the seclusion and privacy of large enclosed compounds (private grounds, as we should say), and in the shade and shelter of trees. Even the photographer and the prosperous merchant ply their industries in the elegant reserve of big compounds, and the citizens drive in there upon their business occasions"[63]. This is true even now of the civil station of Allahabad, which is undoubtedly the best laid out on the plains of Northern India. It has been my second home since 1896.

[63] Mark Twain, More Tramps Abroad, London: Chatto & Windus, 1907, p. 323.

Calcutta, however, stood on an entirely different footings. It had been, since the time of Clive and Warren Hastings, the capital of the great British Indian Empire, which position it retained till 1912, when the seat of the Government of India was removed to Delhi, under the Declaration personally made by King-Emperor George V, at the Darbar held in that city, in December, 1911. Its name was thus surrounded with a halo, and I looked forward with great interest and pleasure to my first visit to Calcutta. My first impressions of the then metropolis of India were distinctly pleasing and agreeable. Though the climate of Calcutta during the greater part of the year, from March to October, is usually trying to those who are not natives of Bengal, it had begun to cool down a bit by the last week of October, when I arrived there. The European quarters of the city, though very much changed for the better, and immeasurably improved during the years that had followed since 1889, were even then impressive to a youth like myself, who had seen no other cities in India except Arrah, Patna and Allahabad. As the City College, in which I had decided to take my admission, was closed for the autumn holidays, I had ample time at my disposal to tramp about on foot, and on trams, the more accessible parts of that great city, almost the whole day. The first fortnight I devoted to seeing the more attractive aspects of Calcutta life-its palatial buildings, and finely-equipped shops, along the Chauringhee, the most famous thoroughfare in Calcutta. I also visited some of the famous public institutions of the city-like the Indian Museum, the Zoological Gardens at Alipur, the Botanical Gardens at Shibpur and others. Calcutta was even then known, in lay parlance, as "a city of palaces"; and such I found it to be during my first visits to the European portions, situated on the southern side of the city.

But this favourable impression of Calcutta did not last long, and I changed my opinion when my college re-opened, and I had to do a long distance daily, either on foot or on tram, to the northern parts of the city. I then found, with a sense of deep disappointment, that Calcutta was not only "city of palaces" but also largely of mean huts. Just a year before my arrival in Calcutta, Rudyard Kipling had published, in 1888, a book called "The City of Dreadful Night". It was a most scathing attack on, and a vehement tirade against Calcutta and its municipal administration, at that time. I shall quote but one passage from it to show Kipling's attitude towards the then capital of the Indo-British Empire. Wrote Rudyard Kipling:- "All India knows of the Calcutta Municipality, but has anyone thoroughly investigated the Big Calcutta Stink? There is only one. It is certainly not an Indian smell. It resembles the essence of corruption that has rotted for the second time.-If you live long enough in Calcutta you grow used to it. The regular residents admit the disgrace, but their answer is: 'Wait till the wind blows off the Salt Lakes, where all the sewage goes, and then you'll smell something'. That is their defence! Small wonder that they consider Calcutta is a fit place for a permanent Viceroy. 'Englishmen, who can calmly extenuate one

shame by another, are capable of asking for anything-and expecting to get it"[64]. This is Kipling at his best or worst, as you please.

But in the above passage, which is a fair example of the contents of Kipling's book one gets an idea-though perhaps highly exaggerated one-of what Calcutta was, in so far as the Indian portions of the city, constituting by far the greater part of it, were concerned, during 'the eighties' of the last century. A study of historical literature relating to Calcutta shows that, about thirty to forty years before Kipling wrote, of it, that city was regarded by many as a place unfit for the habitation of civilised humanity, Sir John Strachey, one of the greatest names in Anglo-Indian administration, who lived in that city as a high Government official during the Viceroyalty of Sir John Lawrence, had recorded his impressions of Calcutta at that time, and the following passage extracted from his famous book-called "India; its Administration and Progress"-will be read with great interest by the residents in Calcutta today. Here is what Sir John Strachey had written about the Calcutta of the sixties of the last century:- "When Lord Lawrence became Viceroy, in 1864, the filth of the city used to rot away in the midst of the population in pestilential ditches, or was thrown into the Hugli, there to float backwards or forward with every change of tide. To nine-tenths of the inhabitants clean water was unknown. They drank either the filthy water of the river, polluted with every conceivable of abomination, or he still filthier contents of the shallow tanks. The river, which was the main source of supply to thousands of people, was not only the receptacle for ordinary filth, it was the great graveyard of the city. I forgot how many thousand corpses were thrown into it every year. I forget how many hundred corpses were thrown into it from Government hospitals and jails, for these practice were not confined to the poor and ignorant: they were followed or allowed, as a matter of course, by the officers of the Government, and of the municipality. I remember the sights which were seen in Calcutta in those days, in the hospitals, and jails, and markets, and slaughter-houses, and public streets. The place was declared, in officials reports, written by myself (in language which was not, and could not be, stronger than the truth required) to be hardly fit for civilised men to live in".[65] Writing, however, in 1903, when he last revised his book, Sir John wrote as follows: "There are now few cities in Europe with which many parts of Calcutta need fear comparison, and although in the poorer quarters there is still much room for improvement, there is hardly a city in the world which has made greater progress"[66]. The Calcutta Improvement Trust had transformed Calcutta almost beyond recognition, since 1903.

---

64 Rudyard Kipling, City of Dreadful Night, In: From Sea to Sea, American Notes, City of Dreadful Night, New York: Doubleday Page and Co., 1923, pp. 187-188.

65 Sir John Strachey, India: Its Administration and Progress, London: Macmillan, 1903 (third edition, revised and enlarged), pp. 10-11.

66 *Ibid* at p. 11.

On the reopening of the City College, situated in the northern part of Calcutta beyond the Senate House of the University, I took my admission in the second year class. The number of students in that class was larger than that in the same class of the Patna College. It was more than two hundred. The class room was not sufficiently large for the accommodation of so many, and we had all to sit huddled together. The Principal and the professors of the institutions were not only almost all of them distinguished scholars, but were also men of high character and noble ideals, as many of them were members of Sadharan Brahmo Samaj. It had been scarcely six years since the death of the great Brahmo Samaj leader, Keshab Chandra Sen, who had founded the New Dispensation section of the Samaj, and the Sadharan Samaj which claimed to represent the original Brahmoism of Rammohan Ray and of Devendra Nath Tagore (the latter the father of the poet, Rabindra Nath) was an influential body at that time. Amongst the leading Brahmos, who were at the head of the administration of the City College, was Ananda Mohan Bose, the first Indian to achieve the high distinction of being a Wrangler at the Cambridge University and one of the earlier batch of Indian members of the English Bar. Being a big landlord in Eastern Bengal he had never betaken himself seriously to the legal profession, but he occupied a high position in the public life of Bengal, and his being at the helm of affairs of the City College gave it a distinctly high position amongst the educational institutions in Calcutta. The most distinguished amongst professors of the college, at that time, was Herendra Chandra Mitra, who was distinguished alike as a scholar and a social reformer. His lectures on English literature used to be highly instructive, and withal attractive.

Ever since my return to India after my call to the Bar and more particularly since 1910, when I acquired a prominent position in the public life of the country, as the result of my election to the Imperial Legislative Council, Professor Mitra had taken great interest in my career, and was fond of saying that he was proud of claiming me as one of his pupils. It was very kind of him to have done so, for the fact was that during the two months that I was a student of the City College, I was so much engrossed in my own plans for shaking the dust of India from off my feet that I doubt whether I attended more than a dozen of his lectures. The only other Professor or, rather Lecturer, whose name I shall recall, was Satyendra Prasanna Sinha, afterwards the first Indian, who sat as a peer in the House of Lords, as Baron Sinha of Raipur, and the first Indian to be elevated to the position of a Governor of a province in British India. Mr. Sinha was, at the time, a struggling junior at the Bar, of three to four years' standing, and had not yet handled his first brief. He depended on his creature comforts on the small pittance which he used to receive as his emoluments for delivering lectures on certain branches of law in the City College, but although I saw him delivering lectures I did not come to know him personally till after my return from England after my call to the Bar, in 1893.

Though I attended but a small number of lectures in the City College, my career as a student of that institution was full of new experiences. In the Patna College though the number of Bengali students was fairly large-about forty out of hundred and thirty-the Biharees were in a large majority. In the City College at Calcutta, I was strictly speaking the only Biharee student. Sometime later I discovered that there was another student from North Bihar, but his father had embraced Brahmoism, and settled down in Calcutta, with the result that the whole family had adopted the customs and manners of Bengal, in food, dress, and many other things, and had also adopted Bengalee as the speech in which they invariably talked even among themselves. I discovered that he and I were distantly related, and I paid visits to his father, who was a retired Deputy Collector in Bihar. But as the son used to come to the College dressed in Bengalee style, he passed for a native of Bengal, and roused no curiosity on the part of the Bengalee students. That, however, was not the case with me. I used to go to the College in the then costume of Bihar-*chapkan* or *sherwani* (a long coat in Indian style coming down to the knee), trousers, and last but not the least, a Christy's cap. As such I was naturally unique in my costume. This style of clothing had ceased to be affected by the youth of Bengal at that time (1889), all of whom used to attend the class in a shirt and a *dhoti*, with or without a *chadar*.

On the contrary, the Bihar or Upper Indian costume then worn had ceased to be used by Bengalees for forty to fifty years before that time. The pictures of Raja Rammohan Ray, and also of second and third generations of Bengalees after him, go to show that the same costume was worn by the higher stratum of the Bengalees till about the time when India passed under the direct control of the British Crown, in 1858. The statue of Prasanna Coomar Tagore-the founder, at the Calcutta Unversity, of the famous Tagore Law Lectures-placed in the portico of the Senate Hall of the University also shows that even after 1858 the costume-which was an adaptation to Indian conditions and climate of that which used to be worn at the court of the Indo-Moghul Emperors-used to be worn by the Bengalees down to the seventies of the last century. This costume, so far as Bengal was concerned, had since then come to be identified with the higher stratum of the Muslims, and my class-fellows, who were all Benagalee Hindus, regarded me, therefore, as a Musalman. It was only after some weeks, when I had come to know them fairly well, that the Biharee student (of whom I have spoken above) explained to my class-fellows that in spite of seemingly Muslim costume I was a Hindu from Bihar. They told me then that they were very much surprised at my wearing at what they regarded Muslim clothes. I explained to them that the costume I wore was that generally adopted at that time by the people in Upper India, and had nothing to do either with Hinduism or Islam. Friendly relations with the Bengalee Hindu students convinces me, however, that in spite of seeming differences in custom, manners and even

speech, there was such a thing as a fundamental unity of India pervading the country, as a whole.

Having left home against the wish of my parents, and gone to Calcutta with the deliberate intention of succeeding in my plan for going to London. I had advisedly taken my admission in the City College in the northern part of Calcutta (while staying at Bhawanipur in the southern part), so that I might have a pretext for being absent from my quarters for long intervals, practically for the whole day. I used to leave my house after an early breakfast at about ten in the forenoon and would not return home till late in the afternoon. I used to drop in for a few minutes, in the College, during the earliest lecture hours, and then devote the rest of the time to tramming about Calcutta, and visiting various offices and institutions, with the object of obtaining information which might be useful to me in carrying out my plan. In doing so I had two main objects in view, the first was to obtain all the informations I could in connection with my proposed visit to London, and he second was to raise enough money to enable me to book my passage (perferably direct) to London, and falling it to Aden. To be able to obtain the necessary information, I used to frequent the Calcutta Bar Library to make the acquaintance of some members of the English Bar, who I thought would assist me with information, if not with funds. But although I wasted several days on this errand, I failed to achieve my object. I was far more successful with the Calcutta Agent of the world-famous firm of Thomas Cook & Son, which (established in 1841) was then nearly half a century old. He received me very kindly, gave me all the information I wanted, and helped me in every possible way he could. He prepared for me a list of the clothes, and other things, which he thought I would require for my comfort on board the steamer, and also on my arrival in London, in the depth of winter. He further assured me that in case I failed to raise enough funds to book my passage direct to London from Calcutta, he would arrange to do so to Aden, on payment of the balance of the passage money to London, within one week as I would be taken to have travelled on a through ticket from Calcutta to London, without a break; which meant a saving of nearly one hundred rupees.

But with all his kindness to me, Cook's Agent could not naturally help me in securing the necessary funds, for which I was thrown upon my own resources. I had taken care to carry with me to Calcutta everything of value which I possessed at that time-gold rings, gold watch and chain, Kashmire shawls, and a few other things of the like kind, and my object in doing so was to sell them, and raise enough funds for my passage money. One day when I was struggling with my fortune, I was delighted to receive a letter from an old friend of my father's, at Arrah. He was at that time an old man of nearly seventy-five, but had the reputation of having amassed a fortune as a lawyer. He lived close to our house at Arrah, but he also enjoyed, and perhaps not undeservedly, the reputation of being a great miser, whose name no one cared to mention in

the morning for fear of passing an inauspicious day. I was, therefore, greatly surprised to find from his letter that he had offered me three hundred rupees towards the payment of my passage money for going to London! He said that he knew as a next-door neighbour all about my ambition and its threatened suppression; but although he belonged, he added, to the orthodox school, he believed that it would be to the great advantage of the community if I could go to London to prosecute my studies for being called to the Bar. Though he enjoined on me absolute secrecy about the matter, for fear of his getting into trouble with my father, he offered (on hearing from me in reply) to send me rupees three hundred in currency notes. Overjoyed at this sudden turn in my fortune-which I naturally regarded as a dispensation of Providence-I wrote to him a gushing letter which was none the less sincere. I received from him, in due course, a registered cover containing three currency notes each of rupees one hundred. This amount became the nucleus of the fund I raised ultimately. The next thing I did was to go about selling the few valuable articles in my possession, but here I was faced with a serious difficulty. In the first place I did not know their proper value, and in the second place in my over-anxiety to have just enough money for going to even as far as Aden, I was but too anxious to part with them at much less than their fair market value. This naturally raised suspicion in the minds of buyers, each of whom suspected that I was in possession of stolen property, and accordingly insisted that I should accompany him to the nearest police station to have certain entries made in the office register as a guarantee of good faith.

They were quite surpised at the alacrity with which I followed each of the buyers to the nearest police station. By thus selling all my valuables at cheap rates, I could raise a sum of about five-hundred rupees. This amount, however, was by no means sufficient to defray the cost of my passage-money to London, and also leaving a margin for expenses on board the steamer, to say nothing of any wherewithal for my expenses in London for some time. On explaining the whole position to the Agent of Cooks, he suggested to me to take a second class steamer ticket as far as Aden, to be able to keep enough money in hand for contingencies and emergencies, and to write to my father the day before my departure explaining the whole position, and asking him to remit to Cook's office in Calcutta the balance of the money due on the through ticket to London. The steamer by which he booked my passage was the SS Nepal of the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company, which was bound for London on the morning of the 26th December 1889. I followed his friendly advice to the letter. On the 25th, the Christmas day; I wrote to my father and also to the two or three friends of my father's, who had helped me either with advice or money. I went on board the steamer in the evening, not trusting to be able to reach the quay the next morning at the very early hour fixed for the departure of the steamer.

Wholly unused as I was to European life, my stay in the steamer on the night of the 25th December, 1889, was a very novel experience. I was allowed to occupy the berth in my cabin in very special circumstances, on the recommendation of Cook's Agent to the Captain of the steamer. There was thus no other passenger on board the steamer that night, and I had also been given warning that no food would be supplied to me until the next morning. Accordingly I went to the steamer after taking an early dinner, my nephews with whom I had been staying in Calcutta, under my father's direction, were very fortunately for me, not there at that time, as they had gone home to spend there the Christmas vacation. They had asked me if I would go back to Arrah for the holidays, but I told them that it being my first Christmas in Calcutta, I preferred to stay there. This was on the face of it a reasonable request, and so they saw nothing in it to object to. The other Biharee lawyers, practising then in the Calcutta High Court, had also left Calcutta for the same reason. I had thus plain sailing before me, both literally and metaphorically. The only members of the Biharee community in Calcutta at the time were those who were going to appear at the University examinations, and almost all of them were sympathetic to my attempt to go to London for study. It was these three or four persons who accompanied me to the steamer on that Christmas night. They also came to see me off next morning. One of them was Krishna Sahay, who many years later, was a member of the Government of Bihar and Orissa as an Executive Councillor, and whom I succeeded as such in 1921. When they were gone after putting me into my cabin, I tried my best to compose myself to sleep, but found it impossible to do so. The officers and the crew of the Nepal had finished their dinner before my arrival, but it being Christmas night, they were all for a carouse, and not only played on instruments and sang till the small hours of the morning, but the British stewards, and the other members of the crew of the same position and standing, kept up-what seemed to me-a din and discordant noise throughout the night. Even, however, if absolute quite had reigned that night, I do not think I could have been able to have enjoyed sound sleep, for I was tremendously excited, and my brain was in a whirl. Though after my sad experience at Patna, I had been extremely cautious in not taking into my confidence any one unless it was absolutely necessary to do so, yet in spite of it I was constantly apprehensive that my secret might again be out, and my second attempt might also be frustrated like the first one. As the result, therefore, of the din and noise on board the steamer that night, and my own excitement, I could have no sleep, and passed a restless night.

I recall even now-after a lapse of more than half a century-my tremendous mental anxiety on the one hand, and the intense excitement on the other. What if my adventurous scheme-like the first one at Patna-again met with the same fate? What if my father-on getting a scent of it once more from someone in Calcutta-turned up the next morning, before the steamer sailed-to take me back

home. But Fates had evidently ordained otherwise; and so I achieved success in my venture. I welcomed the appearance of dawn, and was ready before the break of day walking up and down the topmost deck of the steamer, awaiting the arrival of my friends who had promised to see me off. They came rather late; meanwhile a number of other passengers began to arrive and the spectacle that presented itself to me was interesting and attractive. The boarding of the steamer by the passengers, the trooping in of their numerous friends with garlands, fruits and flowers, to bid good-bye to them, the din and confusion incidental to such an occasion, the officers of the ship taking up their posts of duty (all looking spruce and well-groomed in spite of the previous night's dissipation) the stewards moving about briskly in the dining saloon arranging for breakfast, were all very novel scenes to me, which made a great impression on my young mind about the organising capacity and administrative powers of the British race. At last my friends arrived and they were the last batch of visitors allowed on board the steamer, I bade good-bye to each of them, and gave them instructions to find out from Cook's Agent if my father, or someone else on his behalf, came to pay the balance of my passage money. It was by then eight o' clock and the steamer was to sail at eight fifteen. All the visitors were asked to return ashore; the gangway was removed. The last whistle was given by the funnel of the steamer, and simultaneously it weighed anchor. As the Nepal began to move slowly from the famous Chandpal Ghat, almost all the passengers, including myself, stood on the uppermost deck watching that scene. Slowly and slowly the buildings of Calcutta receded from our view, till in half an hour from the time of sailing, we missed altogether the sight of that city. And thus it was that on the 26th of December, 1889, I was able to carry out my youthful ambition of going to London to qualify myself for the English Bar. The die was cast and the Rubicon was crossed, at last.